

**REVIVAL OF INDIA'S INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND ITS CLASH
WITH THE WESTERN CULTURE IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR*
IN A SIEVE: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY**

MD. SAHIDUL ISLAM

Assistant Professor, Department of English, B. S. Abdur Rahman University, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to focus on the revival of indigenous culture of India after the country's freedom from the British rule with particular reference to Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). Though it was the commonly found theme in the Indian writings during the pre-colonial India, in fact, was not fully explored by the Indian writers during the reign of the British Empire in India due to utter confusion. The postcolonial Indian writers have pursued it and become successful to a great extent in fulfilling their commitments in restoring the Indian values and Kamala Markandaya is not exceptional. This article also discusses how the traditional customs of the East are contrary to the outlook of the West that associates itself with awareness, modernity, innovation, evolution and improvement; and the subsequent clash between the two cultures focussing on their colonizational relationship in the process of modernization.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous Culture of India, Postcolonial, Traditional, Customs, Modernization

INTRODUCTION

This study is about the revival of India's native culture during the postcolonial era and its clash with the European culture as depicted in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). This fictional work of Markandaya is important so far as assertion of cultural identity of India in its fiction in English is concerned. The theme of indigenous culture was very common during the pre-independent India. Notably, the Indian writers in English have continued to deal with that theme even after the independence of the country. Like many other postcolonial Indian writers, Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) too has pursued it and become successful to a great extent in fulfilling her commitment in re-establishing the Indian values. Hence the postcolonial Indian English Literature is stuffed with nativistic images. Kamala Markandaya's ceaseless attempt to return to the roots is, thus, the primary concern in this article. She has used the dogma of inherent ideas—myth and fable in addition to the legends and oral customs of her own culture so as to portray the nativistic images in her selected text *Nectar in a Sieve* in particular and other fictional works in general. Simultaneously, this article also focuses how such traditional customs of the East are contrary to the outlook of the West that associates itself with awareness, modernity, innovation, evolution and improvement; and the subsequent clash between the two cultures focussing on their colonizational relationship in the process of modernization.

Two hundred years of British colonization which left behind an Indian sub-continent stunned, puzzled and perplexed are the primary reasons behind the inclination of the postcolonial writers to feel the requirement for and declare an assurance to the re-establishment of Indian values. In this context Ganesh N. Devy in his book *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* claims that India has great literary culture of its own. But for long it has remained submerged in the collective unconscious of the Indian psyche. According to him the cause of this repression or 'amnesia' is the colonisation of India, and the only way to get out of the clutches of that amnesia is to concentrate and practice pre-

colonial Indian literary tradition. However, “The current affliction of cultural amnesia is compounded by the traditional Indian anxiety over the loss of memory” (Devy, Ganesh N. 1992: 150). Postcolonial Indian Literature in English which is well recognised in the West still possesses the elements of colonial literature. Notably, Indian traditional culture opposes the modern culture, the West stands for. As a result of which the tension between East and West is evident in the works of majority of the postcolonial Indo-Anglian authors. Apart from the themes like poverty, hunger, humiliation and the Indian culture, the theme of nativism which leads to the cultural conflicts between the East and West is also obvious in Kamala Markandaya’s major works such as *Some Inner Fury* (1956), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffer Dreams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973) and *Nectar in a Sieve* is not exceptional.

Kamala Markandaya’s debut novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is replete with nativistic images. For instance, the author has tried to revive the Hindu mythology through the traditional names. For instance, the images of the Hindu mother Goddess (symbol of dissolution and destruction), the mother of the eldest three of *Pandava* brothers from the Indian epic *Mahabharata* are referred to through the two characters Kali and Kunthi respectively in the novel. In this regard it can be said that Markandaya seems to presume that her readers have proper understanding of Hindu mythology.

In fact, the theme of East-West encounter in Kamala Markandaya’s fictions reflects her familiarity to the West and its culture. In this context R. S. Singh has aptly said that:

Without any effort on her part to misrepresent the Indian or the
Western Culture, she has tried to evaluate the direction Indian society
Has taken since independence (Singh, R. S. 1977: 144)

While dealing with the theme of cultural conflict between the East and the West, Kamala Markandaya has shown the contrast between the two: the affinity of the Indians towards tradition is reflected through the various characters of her novels having Indian roots. The West has embraced the modernity; and the Indians have opted for the spiritual value contrary to the materialistic outlook of the West. In *Nectar in a Sieve* such conflict is depicted through Nathan and Rukmani, who represent the East, and Dr. Kenny, who is the representative of the West. However, the author remains unbiased so far as her depiction of the merits and demerits of the cultures of the East and West is concerned. C. D. Narasimhaiah has rightly said in this regard that: “her [Kamala Markandaya’s] good men and women come from both cultures” (qtd. in Arora, Sudhir Kumar. 2006: 26).

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya has tried her best to portray the conditions of the life of the people of India in general and the people of rural area in particular. While doing so she has emphasised on the simple life-style of the people of the villages which comprised the bulk of the Indian population. She has dealt with their customs, traditions, professions, occupations and dignity; and categorically pointed out how they suffer the agony of poverty and hunger with a special focus on the illiteracy which leads them to believe in superstitions. The author has also depicted very skilfully the uncertain fate of the farmers of India even after their hard toil. The fear of draught and heavy rains haunts them because both are equally harmful for the crops. As the farmers depend on their crops for their livelihood, the natural disasters like heavy downpour and draught might reduce them to poverty level. This is what exactly happened with Nathan and Rukmani in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. First of all they suffer due to draught which has compelled them to sell their meagre belongings to the gluttonous and heartless-village Banya, Biswas. Moreover, the cold-hearted landlord has forced them to leave their thatched cottage and the land of their possession, though it was very tough for them to bear their eviction from their cottage.

The vivid depiction of the suffering of Nathan and Rukmani along with their children at different stages—their daughter Ira's decision/step of going out to the streets in order to save the life of the latter's dying brother Kuti; the death of their youngest child Kuti who suffers for the most part due to illness; the incidents pertaining to Nathan and Rukmani who were compelled to break stones to earn money for their survival/to make both ends meet and their helplessness as reflected through their dependence on charity in a temple after their eviction from their cottage by the cruel-village Banya reflects the extreme level of poverty in *Nectar in a Sieve*. These reasons are sufficient behind the illiteracy of the underdogs which restricts the development of their rational faculty and the ultimate result is their inclination towards superstitions with a bleak future prospect. One important aspect to be noted in this regard—the novelist has tried to convey the message that the feeding of the poor people at the temple is not merely a charity but it stands for a tradition that is steadily established in the life of Indian people.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya has shown a "New Woman—a wonderful improved race of traditional woman" (Arora, Sudhir Kumar. 2006: vii) in whom there is the trait of "a typical Indian housewife" (Bhatnagar, Anil Kumar. 2010: 131). Amid her sufferings, Rukmani remains calm and composed reflecting the patience of an Indian woman of patriarchal set up. On the one hand Rukmani is faithful to her husband. On the other hand, like an Indian God-fearing woman she fears God, which is obvious from her speech: "My mother, whenever I paid her a visit, would make me accompany her to a temple, and together we would pray and pray before the deity, imploring for help until we were giddy" (Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 18). She does not lose her patience if God delays in granting her prayers because "Gods have other things to do" (Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 18).

Contrarily, Dr. Kenny, who has come to India with a missionary enthusiasm to serve the poor people of India tries his best to do his duty sincerely, but failed to resist his indifferent attitude towards Indian culture for a long time. With the passage of time, Dr. Kenny has lost his patience and revolted against the Indian's attitude of passive acceptance of the spiritual culture. He convinces the poor miserable peasants who cling to the dictates of God, to concentrate in their work:

...do not think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from
Suffering? What thoughts have you when your belly is empty or your
Body is sick? Tell me they are noble ones and I will call you a liar.
(Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 114)

Even Rukmani's excessive dependence on fate during the time of difficulty and her readiness to wait for better time to come with a great hope irritates Dr. Kenny to a great extent. Such passiveness in the character of Rukmani not only arouses anger in Dr. Kenny but also provokes the latter to shout at the former saying that:

Times are better, times are better ... Times will not be better for many
Months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools
Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand—cry
out for help—do something? There is nothing in this country, oh God,
there is nothing! (Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 44)

Dr. Kenny further reacts with revulsion hearing Rukmani's revelation of the fact pertaining to Indian culture that "our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments" with a purpose to clean souls:

My God! ... I do not understand you. I never will. Go before I too am

Entangled in your philosophies (Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 114)

Moreover, Kamala Markandaya has very skilfully introduced/depicted the dogma of inherent idea of dowry. So far as social customs and traditions are concerned the people of India are exceptionally orthodox and conservative. It is aptly depicted by Kamala Markandaya in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Due to the slowness in the process of social change, the people of India especially in the rural area scrupulously observe the ancient traditions without fail. According to them, the failure to observe their customs in the strict sense would surely bring disaster and calamity as it is a symbol of ill-omen. The novelist has conveyed the message in *Nectar in a Sieve* as to how the age old custom of dowry is responsible in making wide difference in choosing the bridegroom. It is conveyed in the novel that the more dowry the bride's father would able to provide, the better would be the status of the bridegroom and vice versa. Rukmani herself reveals this fact in the context of her marriage in front of Nathan, a tenant-farmer. She has claimed that her elder sisters were married with bridegrooms having better status than hers because her father failed to arrange a considerable amount of money as dowry during the time of her turn:

My three sisters were married long before I was. Shanta first, a big
Wedding which lasted for many days, plenty of gifts and feasts,
Diamond earrings, a gold necklace, as befitted the daughter of the
Village headman Padmini next, and she too made a good match and
Was married fittingly taking jewels and dowry with her; but when it
Came to Thangam, only relations from our own village came to the
Wedding and not from the surrounding districts as they had done
Before, and the only jewel she had was a diamond nose-screw.

(Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 1-2)

Kamala Markandaya has pointed out another strong point of the culture of the East according to which marriage is 'sacrament'. In this regard Sudhir Kumar Arora rightly observes that: "Marriage is woman's adventure and with it, there is an end of her search as she merges herself in the family losing her identity" (Arora, Sudhir Kumar. 2006: 36). In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the author has shown the traditional way of celebration of marriage ceremony in an Indian set up where certain rituals are mandatory. For instance, "a garland of mango leaves, symbol of happiness and good fortune" (Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 4) that was used during Rukmani's marriage comes under traditional rituals. Next, during the time of Ira's marriage traditional rituals were also maintained:

Wedding day Women from the village came to assist. Janaki, Kali,
Many I hardly knew. We went with Ira to the river and, when she was
Freshly bathed, put on her red sari I had worn at my own wedding. Its
Rich heavy folds made her look more slender than she was, made her
Look a child...I darkened her eyes with *kohl* and the years fell away
More, she was so pitifully young I could hardly believe she was to be

Married, today. (Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 36)

However, marriage is simply a contract in the West which is evident through Dr. Kenny's conversation with Rukmani when the former says to the later: "My wife has left me. My sons have been taught to forget me" (Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 108).

Kamala Markandaya has also dealt with certain custom of the Muslim culture in her novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novelist has graphically depicted the 'doctrine' of *purdha* system which is mandatory for the Muslim women to wear in public. It is through Rukmani's encounter with a Muslim lady to whom the former sells her home-grown vegetables that the readers are informed about the life style of Muslim women in general who can remove their veil only inside their houses:

Once, and once only, I actually saw one of those women, close. I was
Taking a few vegetables to market when I saw her beckoning me to
Come indoors. I did so, and as soon as the door was closed the woman
Threw off her veil the better to select what she wanted ... There was
Something about those closed doors and shuttered windows that struck
Coldly at me, used as I was to open fields and the sky and the
Unfettered sight of the sun (Markandaya, Kamala. 2002: 48)

After a thorough study, it can be said that it is the traditional value system in which the people of India relies upon does not suit the Western way of life as depicted in *Nectar in a Sieve*. As a result of such contrasted value systems there occurs the tension between the East and the West. The various aspects of the Eastern culture as reflected through a number of characters already mentioned above are irritating for the Westerners whereas the Indians observe those with keen interests. The indifferent reactions of the character like Dr. Kenny towards the culture of India are notable in this regard. The above discussion, thus, justifies the fact that Kamala Markandaya is successful in her incessant effort to return to the roots which leads but to the cultural clash between the East and the West.

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AUTHOR DETAILS

Dr. Md. Sahidul Islam is an Assistant Professor in the department of English, B.S. Abdur Rahman University, Seethakathi Estate, Vandalur, Chennai-600048, India. He did his PhD degree on the selected works of John Updike, Orhan Pamuk, Hanif Kureishi and Khaled Hosseini. The topic of his research is "Representation of Political Islam in Recent

Fiction with Particular Reference to John Updike's *Terrorist* Pamuk's *Snow* Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*". His areas of interest are postmodern fiction and Indian literature in English. He has attended national and international seminars and presented papers. He writes articles preferably on fiction and poetry. He has written articles and presented papers on the works of some of the prominent writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Salman Rushdie, Nissim Ezekiel, Amitav Ghosh, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Chinua Achebe, Hanif Kureishi, Orhan Pamuk and Khaled Hosseini. He has also recently been chosen to publish two chapters in two different books: *Recalling Romanticism* (in Press) and *Booker Prize winning Novels of India* (in press). The titles of the chapters include "The Wretched of the Earth": A Study with Reference to William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" and "History, Myth, Fundamentalism and Postmodernism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" respectively.